How Are Schools and Districts Responding to Closures?

As of March 31, 2020, 47 states and a number of autonomous U.S. jurisdictions (e.g., the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico) have closed their public schools, private schools, or both in an effort to slow the transmission of COVID-19.[1] At this juncture, much of the nation has focused on how to best educate students via distance learning and on reinventing or rescheduling various academic programs and events that the current pandemic has disrupted (e.g., state testing, special education services).[2] However, while "[c]ritical academic infrastructure and service provision must be considered during school closure," districts are also trying to determine how to maintain other aspects of their daily operations.[3]

Key Aspects of District Operations

Academic Programming

Support Services

Human Resources

Facilities Management

Finance and Business

Source: Mosaica Education and School Growth[4]

Many districts and schools—particularly those without a formally executed plan for distance learning—are focusing mostly on academic concerns.[5] Yet, "a daunting list of operational and financial issues remains to be tackled" beyond academics, including continuity of nutritional services, medical and social services, and healthy business operations.[6] Despite the physical closure of schools, it is vital that districts provide those services that the larger school community depends on or expects—to the extent possible given the latest guidance and directives from individual states and the federal government.[7] **District and school leaders must carefully examine and implement strategies to maintain essential functions that their organizations perform in the community and in service of various stakeholder groups (e.g., students, families, staff).**[8]

Notably, **a review of 46 existing COVID-19 response plans from U.S. school districts** conducted by the Center on Reinventing Public Education finds that districts are directing resources not devoted to building online and distance learning plans toward meeting students' health, safety, and nutritional needs. For example, this review finds that:[9]

- **Almost all examined districts have some form of meal delivery plan underway**, typically "grab and go" meals available at selected school sites. Policies vary on if students must be physically present to receive meals or if others can pick up food on their behalf. For example, the Denver Public Schools uses community centers to serve dinner to adults and children.
- **District communications on multiple platforms emphasize public health and student safety.** Some amplify local public health officials' messaging or stress the importance of hand washing, social distancing, and other public health practices.
- **Some districts are using public communication platforms to educate families about the virus**. For example, in an attempt to explain COVID-19 to students, Montgomery County Public Schools (MD) posted a link to a National Public Radio comic for children.

District Responses to COVID-19 School Closures

The Center on Reinventing Public Education currently maintains a database of publicly available plans and procedures that U.S. school districts are using to adjust their instructional programming, student support services, and other organizational operations. The database can provide examples to districts and schools as they seek to navigate various challenges resulting from COVID-19 and related school closures. The database is available via the hyperlinked icon below.

Source: Center on Reinventing Public Education[10]

Spotlight: Nutritional and Food Services

Continuance of meal programs for students in need is one of two "related supports for students" cited by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as needing attention in districts' emergency plans.[11] It is also a dynamic that has received considerable media attention, both due to the essential nature of school-provided meals for students in poverty and the concerns that workers responsible for preparing and distributing those meals have regarding potential COVID-19 infections.[12]

To alleviate some of these concerns, **the U.S. Department of Agriculture has waived a number of restrictions to its meal programs** so schools can provide free and reduced-price meals while closed. Districts also have the option to "serve meals in a non-congregate setting and at school sites during school closures related to the coronavirus."[13] Moreover, parents and guardians can pick up meals for their children even if those children are not present, thereby reducing the number of people who need to leave their homes.[14]

A range of strategies—such as meal pick-up sites and home delivery of multiple meals—are being deployed that other districts can model in their own communities.[15] For example, New York City Public Schools—located in an epicenter of COVID-19 infections—has set up more than 400 distribution sites where families can retrieve three free meals each day.[16] Shelby County Schools (TN) has partnered with its local YMCA to establish meal distribution sites.[17] Liberty Public Schools (MO) offers both meal pick-up locations and meal delivery for qualifying families, and Bemidji Area Schools (MN) offers home meal delivery with a parent's or guardian's consent.[18]

Spotlight: Childcare Services

Despite a high volume of school closures, some districts are grappling with the need for childcare to allow parents and guardians with "essential" professions (e.g., healthcare positions) to work.[19] Districts must weigh the need for childcare in the community with their capacity to fill this need safely for all those involved (e.g., staff, children).[20] Furthermore, districts need to adhere to **state directives for the provision of childcare** during the COVID-19 outbreak.[21] Should a district opt to provide childcare services, they should follow both state health agency and **CDC guidelines** to limit viral transmissions and best maintain the health of all involved stakeholders.[22]

As with other areas of emergency operations, districts have had varying responses to the issue of childcare. Seattle Public Schools has partnered with local organizations (e.g., the Boys and Girls Club) to open childcare spaces at 12 campuses.[23] Columbus City Schools (OH), in line with state guidelines, provides information to families about how to access childcare at programs with a Temporary Pandemic Child Care license, which can only serve families of essential workers.[24] Similarly, New York City Public Schools is operating Regional Enrichment Centers to care for children of "first responders, health care providers, transit workers, and other key personnel."[25]

Problem-Solving Advice to Face the Challenges Ahead

Educators already have good problem-solving skills, and now is the time to insist on using those skills together with colleagues to develop strategies within their schools and districts to address the challenges resulting from COVID-19. To get through these difficulties, it is going to be imperative that schools shift from operating in an authoritarian manner, where the school leaders make all of the decisions, to a more democratic operational approach. All educators will need to increase their skills in group decision-making. It is also important to know that first decisions may not end up being effective. This is to be expected. It is perfectly acceptable and necessary to try a strategy and conclude it is not effective. This is not failure. This is life.

To engage in effective problem-solving ask: What is the situation? What do we want to accomplish? What strategies could we use? Is each in accord with our values and the standards that we must comply with? For each, what might happen? What is the best first choice or choices? How should we proceed? Did this work? What else could or should we do?

Source: Education Week[26]

What Other Areas Should Be Considered?

While this list is not all-inclusive, districts should begin to consider the following items (if they have not already done so) to ensure that they are prepared to meet the needs of students, families, and staff during these uncertain times and over the coming months:

Budgets:[27] The long-term economic impacts of the current pandemic are unknown, but given what has been observed to this point in the U.S. and world economies, district leaders should consider several fiscal eventualities, including reduced local tax revenue and decreased state and federal support for school programs. Such dynamics may necessitate tough decisions about how to allocate available funds and how to generate new income streams or tap emergency revenue to pay for a variety of expenses.

Human Resources:[28] Districts may continue to pay their entire staff or certain staff member classifications during school closures and should decide the mechanics behind how payroll will work and whether employees will be reassigned to different duties. Relatedly, districts must consider what hiring practices to fill staff vacancies will look like in light of physical distancing guidelines and a potential surge in the supply of applicants in the wake of mass layoffs across the country.

Services to Support Students', Families', and Staff's Physical and Mental Health:[29] The current COVID-19 pandemic is increasing the anxiety and stress levels of stakeholders who have been abruptly thrown out of their daily routines due to school closure and state-mandated "stay-at-home" orders. At the same time, layoffs, furloughs, and pay reductions resulting from the virus's economic impacts will likely increase the need for meals, emotional and mental supports, and health care to fill gaps in familial capacity and to address new trauma.

Leveraging Volunteers:[30] At a time when community support is vital, districts should explore avenues for individual citizens and local organizations to contribute to their primary educational mission and other operations, especially given the potentially increased enthusiasm to support students and families during this crisis. Volunteers may be able to support items such as meal delivery, virtual tutoring, and any other needs that schools and stakeholders have. Districts should consider their own unique needs and how volunteer support can fill those needs while prioritizing community health.

Endnotes

[1] Maxwell, L.A. "Which States Have Closed Schools for Coronavirus?" Education Week, March 29, 2020. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2020/03/which_states_have_closed_schools_coronavirus.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-FB [2] "Map: Coronavirus and School Closures." Education Week, March 30, 2020. https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html

[2] [1] "Supplemental Fact Sheet: Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Schools While Serving Children with Disabilities." U.S. Department of Education, March 21, 2020. pp. 1–5. https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/rr/policyguidance/Supple%20Fact%20Sheet%203.21.20%20FINAL.pdf [2] DeVos, B. "Secretary's Letter to Chief Staff School Officers Regarding Waiver of Assessment and Accountability Requirements Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) During COVID-19 National Emergency." U.S. Department of Education, US Department of Education (ED), March 20, 2020. https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/secletter/200320.html [3] Herold, B. "The Scramble to Move America's Schools Online." Education Week, March 27, 2020. https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/26/the-scramble-to-move-americas-schools-online.html [4] Bridgeland, J. and R. Balfanz. "COVID-19 Is Exposing the Gaps in Our Education System. Let's Start Fixing Them." Education Week, March 27, 2020. https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/27/covid-19-is-exposing-the-gaps-in-our.html

[3] "Considerations for School Closure." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/considerations-for-school-closure.pdf

[4] Figure adapted from: [1] "School Management and Operations." Mosaica Education. http://mosaicaeducation.com/school-management-operations/ [2] Barron, S. "9 Areas of School Operational Design." School Growth, March 4, 2014. https://www.schoolgrowth.com/blog/school-operational-design/

[5] Lake, R. "The Latest from a Nationwide Survey: Districts Continue to Struggle Toward Online Learning." Center on Reinventing Public Education, March 28, 2020. https://www.crpe.org/thelens/latest-nationwide-survey-districts-continue-struggle-toward-online-learning

[6] [1] Lake, R. "What We're Learning from an Early Look at District COVID-19 Response Plans." Center on Reinventing Public Education, March 20, 2020. https://www.crpe.org/thelens/what-were-learning-early-look-district-covid-19-response-plans [2] "Interim Guidance for Administrators of U.S. K-12 Schools and Child Care Programs." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 19, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-schools.html [3] "Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 22, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html

[7] [1] Ray. "School Operations and Management." Center for Educational Innovation. https://the-cei.org/what-we-do/direct-services-to-public-schools/school-operations-management/ [2] "State Action on Coronavirus (COVID-19)." National Council of State Legislatures, March 30, 2020. https://www.ncsl.org/research/health/state-action-on-coronavirus-covid-19.aspx [3] "Government Response to Coronavirus, COVID-19." USA.Gov, March 30, 2020. https://www.usa.gov/coronavirus

[8] Dankleff, K. "A Customer Service Mindset in School Operations." BES, January 25, 2016. https://bes.org/a-customer-service-mindset-in-school-operations/

[9] Preceding text adapted, and bulleted text quoted verbatim, with minor adaptations, from: Lake, "What We're Learning from an Early Look at District COVID-19 Response Plans," Op. cit.

[10] Figure adapted from: Chu, L. et al. "District Responses to COVID-19 School Closures." Center on Reinventing Public Education. https://www.crpe.org/content/covid-19-school-closures

[11] "Interim Guidance for Administrators of U.S. K-12 Schools and Child Care Programs," Op. cit.

[12] [1] Mitchell, C. "Coronavirus Fears Lead School Districts to Halt or Make Changes to Children's Food Services." Education Week, March 26, 2020. https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/24/coronavirus-fears-lead-school-districts-to-halt.html [2] Mitchell, C. "School Food Service Directors Fear Children Will Go Hungry During Coronavirus Crisis." Education Week, March 20, 2020. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/District_Dossier/2020/03/schools_fear_children_will_go_hungry_coronavirus.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-FB

[13] "FNS Response to COVID-19." U.S. Department of Agriculture, March 30, 2020. https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic/covid-19

[14] Blad, E. "New Rule Lets Parents Pick Up Free Meals for Children During Coronavirus Closures." Education Week, March 27, 2020. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2020/03/rule-parents-pick-up-free-meals-coronavirus-closures.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-FB

[15] Hess, R. "Straight Up on COVID-19: Iconic Great City Schools Chief Mike Casserly on the Urban Response." Education Week, March 31, 2020. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rick_hess_straight_up/2020/03/straight_up_on_covid-19_iconic_great_city_schools_chief_mike_casserly_on_urban_response.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-FB

[16] [1] "Cases in U.S." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 31, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html [2] "Free Meals." New York City Department of Education. https://www.schools.nyc.gov/school-life/food/free-meals

[17] "Coronavirus Facts." Shelby County Schools (TN). http://www.scsk12.org/coronavirusfacts/

[18] [1] "Liberty Public Schools Emergency Meal Provision Plan." Liberty Public Schools (MO). http%3A%2F%2Fwww.lps53.org%2Fsite%2Fdefault.aspx%3FPageID%3D7975 [2] "Home." Bemidji Area Schools (MN). https://www.bemidji.k12.mn.us/ [3] "Consent for Home Meal Delivery During the COVID-19 School Closure." Bemidji Area Schools (MN). https://www.bemidji.k12.mn.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Consent-for-Home-Meal-Delivery-during-the-COVID-19-School-Closure.pdf

[19] Will, M. "Providing Child Care During Coronavirus School Closures a Tough Question." Education Week, March 17, 2020. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/District_Dossier/2020/03/child_care_coronavirus_school_closures.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-FB

[20] "Child Care Is Essential and Needs Emergency Support to Survive." National Association for the Education of Young Children, March 15, 2020. https://www.naeyc.org/resources/blog/child-care-needs-emergency-support

21 "State Child Care Actions in Response to COVID-19." The Hunt Institute. http://www.hunt-institute.org/covid-19-resources/state-child-care-actions-covid-19/

22 "Guidance for Schools and Child Care Programs: Before and During an Outbreak." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 21, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/index.html

23 "Child Care." Seattle Public Schools. https://www.seattleschools.org/district/calendars/news/what_s_new/coronavirus_update/resources/child_care

24 "Resources for Families." Columbus City Schools (OH). https://www.ccsoh.us/Page/7531

25 "Regional Enrichment Centers." New York City Department of Education. https://www.schools.nyc.gov/enrollment/enrollment-help/regional-enrichment-centers

26 Figure contents quoted verbatim, with minor adaptations, from: DeWitt, P. "How to Find Resilience During This Difficult Time." Education Week, March 26, 2020. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/finding_common_ground/2020/03/how_to_find_resilience_during_this_difficult_time.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-FB

27 [1] Burnette, D. "5 Things District Leaders Should Brace for During a Recession." Education Week, March 25, 2020. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/District_Dossier/2020/03/school_districts_recession_coronavirus.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-FB [2] Burnette, D. "Districts Brace for Crash in State K-12 Revenue Due to Coronavirus - Education Week." Education Week, March 19, 2020. https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/19/districts-states-brace-for-crash-in-k-12.html [3] Burnette, D. "Coronavirus Impact Puts Spotlight on States', Districts' 'Rainy Day' Funds." Education Week, March 20, 2020. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2020/03/amid_virus_outbreak_recession_.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-FB

28 [1] Burnette, "5 Things District Leaders Should Brace for During a Recession," Op. cit. [2] Perry, A.M. "After Coronavirus Subsides, We Must Pay Teachers More." Brookings Institution, March 30, 2020. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/03/30/after-coronavirus-subsides-we-must-pay-teachers-more/ [3] Barnum, M. "Teachers Are Still Getting Paid as Schools Close. Substitutes, Not Necessarily." Chalkbeat, March 17, 2020. https://chalkbeat.org/posts/us/2020/03/17/teacher-pay-coronavirus-substitutes/ [4] Mann, M. "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance for Schools." National Association of Independent Schools, April 1, 2020. https://www.nais.org/articles/pages/additional-covid-19-guidance-for-schools/ [5] Harris, D.N. "Using Federal Stimulus to Get Schools Through the Coronavirus Crisis: The Case for Summer School and Summer Teacher Pay." Brookings Institution, March 11, 2020. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/03/11/using-federal-stimulus-to-get-schools-through-the-coronavirus-crisis-the-case-for-summer-school-and-summer-teacher-pay/ [6] Burnette, D. "What Spending in Schools Looks Like During the Coronavirus." Education Week, March 27, 2020. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/District_Dossier/2020/03/spending_schools_coronavirus.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-FB [7] Lieberman, M. "Paying School Employees During Prolonged Shutdowns Is a Major Dilemma." Education Week, March 19, 2020. https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/19/paying-school-employees-during-prolonged-shutdowns-is.html [8] Lieberman, M. "If Coronavirus Closes School, Who Gets Paid and How?" Education Week, March 11, 2020. https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/10/if-coronavirus-closes-school-who-gets-paid.html [9] Heubeck, E. "With Schools Shut Down, What Happens to Hiring?" Education Week, March 20, 2020. https://mobile.edweek.org/c.jsp;jsessionid=A72A7369A8DD0E339625966F043B20B7.vincent2?cid=25919951&bcid=&rssid=25919141&item=http%3a%2f%2fapi.edweek.org%2fv1%2few%2f%3fuuid%3d6FBEF682-6AC0-11EA-BF8E-8AF258D98AAA

29 [1] Burnette, "5 Things District Leaders Should Brace for During a Recession," Op. cit. [2] "Interim Guidance for Administrators of U.S. K-12 Schools and Child Care Programs," Op. cit. [3] Cipriano, C. and M. Brackett. "Teacher, Interrupted: Leaning into Social-Emotional Learning Amid the COVID-19 Crisis." EdSurge, March 18, 2020. https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-03-18-teacher-interrupted-leaning-into-social-emotional-learning-amid-the-covid-19-crisis [4] "SEL Resources During COVID-19." Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. https://casel.org/covid-resources/ [5] Belli, B. "Yale Webinars: Using Emotional Intelligence to Combat COVID-19 Anxiety." Yale University, March 24, 2020. https://news.yale.edu/2020/03/24/yale-webinars-using-emotional-intelligence-combat-covid-19-anxiety [6] "Ideas for School Nurse Activities During the COVID-19 Pandemic." National Association of School Nurses. pp. 1–3. https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/NASN/3870c72d-fff9-4ed7-833f-215de278d256/UploadedImages/PDFs/03182020_NASN_Ideas_for_School_Nurse_Activities_During_the_COVID-19__Pandemic.pdf

30 [1] "Help with COVID-19." VolunteerMatch. https://www.volunteermatch.org/covid19 [2] "Help Support Vermonters Affected by COVID-19." State of Vermont. https://www.vermont.gov/volunteer [3] "How to Get Involved: COVID-19." Baltimore City Health Department. https://health.baltimorecity.gov/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/volunteering-those-affected-covid-19 [4] "Help Your Community Safely with COVID-19." California Volunteers | State of California. https://californiavolunteers.ca.gov/get-involved/covid-19/ [5] "Volunteer Response to COVID-19 / Coronavirus." Montgomery County Volunteer Center (MD). https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/volunteercenter/volunteers/covid19.html [6] "Volunteer." Seattle Public Schools. https://www.seattleschools.org/families_communities/volunteer [7] "COVID-19 Volunteer Support." Lewisville Independent School District (TX). http%3A%2F%2Fwww.lisd.net%2Fsite%2Fdefault.aspx%3FPageID%3D23694 [8] "City Schools-General Volunteer Interest." Baltimore City Public Schools. https://bcpss.ezcommunicator.net/edu/bcpss/Take_Survey.aspx?App=0&id=27&u=0